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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TAIPEI 002511

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SUBJECT: CANDIDATES COMPETE TO SURVIVE UNDER NEW
LEGISLATIVE ELECTION SYSTEM

REF: TAIPEI 01066

Classified By: AIT Deputy Director Robert S. Wang,
Reasons: 1.4 (b/d)

11. (C) Summary: Taiwan will introduce a radically revamped legislative election system in 2008, halving the number of legislators and establishing 73 new election districts with single representatives. The new system will also include 6 seats reserved for aborigines and 34 at large party-list representatives. The previous system allowed many "media image" candidates to win election based on a small number of votes spread throughout large multi-member districts. By contrast, the new single-member districts compel candidates to focus on grassroots work to win majority support in their districts. Some prominent "image" legislators who lack local bases have already been eliminated in party primaries. Some others are busy working the grassroots to build the support bases they now need to compete in head-to-head district competition, while still others have managed to secure slots as party list candidates. End Summary.

New Rules of the Game...

12. (U) Taiwan will introduce a radically revamped legislative election system on January 12, 2008, halving the number of legislators from 225 to 113 and establishing 73 small election districts with single representatives. This change abandons the previous multi-member districts and also gives voters a second ballot they can cast for the party of their choice. The 73 new electoral districts each contain an average of 300,000 residents, though several are much smaller because each county and city has at least one district, regardless of population. Indigenous peoples will cast ballots for 6 additional seats reserved for plains and mountain aborigines running in island-wide districts. The remaining 34 seats will be allocated among the political parties based on the proportion of votes they receive on a second ballot for party preference (reftel).

...Force Candidates to Focus on Grassroots

13. (C) The previous system allowed many "image" candidates, including some controversial figures, to rely on media

exposure to gain the support they needed from a small number of voters in large multi-member districts. Image candidates were especially common in metropolitan areas such as Taipei. Under the new system, most district candidates must focus on grassroots work to win majority support in their election districts. DPP Legislator Tsai Chi-chang described candidates who focus on media exposure as the "air force," who are dropping bombs but without knowing where the bombs will land, that is, without knowing whether potential voters will see them. By contrast, Tsai characterized his current focus on attending weddings and funerals as an "infantry" campaign. KMT Legislator and Standing Committee member Hsu Chung-hsiung recently told AIT that under the new system a candidate's personality and charisma, personal connections, and constituent services will be more important to local voters than party identification or legislative record. As a result, he said, candidates are spending most of their time in their home districts meeting local residents and courting voters rather than passing bills in the legislature. On a more negative note, a number of more able, policy-oriented legislators have told AIT they fear the new system will produce fewer legislators with international and national policy exposure.

14. (C) The candidates' focus on working the grassroots rather than the media has produced what many observers describe as a "cold" election atmosphere, with campaign billboards and political rallies appearing later than in previous LY elections. Taipei County DPP Director Chang Chi-wen explained to AIT that candidates are spending less on large rallies and publicity because they are not as effective in the smaller districts. Many candidates have chosen to delay the establishment of their campaign headquarters until

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late November, choosing instead to spend more time attending as many local funerals and weddings as possible.

A Profile of Candidate Types

15. (C) Traditionally, Taiwan legislators have fallen into two general categories: those with strong influence in their local community and those with media reputations, whether savory or unsavory. Many legislators of course combine elements of both categories. With the halving of the legislature and under the new election rules, most district candidates have no choice but to focus less on media appearances and more on consolidating or building their local political bases. Rather than running in district contests, a number of well-known "image" candidates now appear on party lists, which include some candidates without local bases and others who lost their district primary races to candidates with stronger local bases.

16. (C) The power broker, one important type of locally influential legislator, tends to be heavy on organization but weak on policy and image. Local power brokers generally spend their whole career in a particular locale, working their way up through a series of positions such as councilperson, mayor, and legislator, and many have major business interests. A power broker from a rural district may rely on local factions, strong support from agricultural and irrigation associations, and vote buying to mobilize supporters on election day. Many KMT and pro-Blue independent legislators fall into this category, as traditionally the KMT has controlled the network of agricultural and irrigation associations and has co-opted local factions.

17. (C) Some legislators or their family members have encountered legal problems related corruption or vote buying. A powerful independent legislator, Yen Ching-piao in Taichung County, has an underworld gang background, but is quite popular locally and regarded as effective in providing services to constituents. Recognizing his influence, both

the KMT and DPP try to stay on his good side. (Note: KMT stalwarts Ma Ying-jeou and Wang Jin-pyng recently appeared prominently at a well-publicized rally at each side of Yen. End Note.)

18. (C) Populist candidates, who can be found in both rural and urban areas, rely on a combination of personal image, policy ideals, and appeal to local interests to win votes. Lacking organizational backing, they work to build support by appealing directly through personal interactions with voters.

Such candidates attend innumerable weddings and funerals and also work the parks and markets to increase recognition by constituents. They promote popular community-focused projects and also offer a variety of constituent services.

19. (C) A close bellwether race in Taichung County's First District pits Liu Chuan-chung, a local KMT power broker, against Tsai Chi-chang, a DPP populist. Both incumbent legislators, the wealthy Liu has won past elections handily by relying on a powerful local faction, the network of agricultural and irrigation associations, and vote buying, according to Tsai. Liu remains virtually unknown to the media in Taipei, because he rarely shows up at the legislature. In contrast to Liu, who relies on organizations rather than personal connections to individual voters, Tsai spends his days attending funerals and weddings to make personal contact with large numbers of potential supporters. Tsai also emphasizes his responsiveness to the requests of

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local residents for community projects such as parks and his work to set up a service that provides free legal advice to constituents.

110. (C) Image candidates rely heavily on media publicity, with some attracting attention by taking radical positions, spreading sensational scandal stories, or resorting to fierce attacks on political opponents. Traditionally, image-based legislators have flourished in urban areas, where social networks are lacking and personal acquaintance is less

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important to voters. Toughness often works better than a positive image. KMT candidate Chiu Yi of Kaohsiung, for example, is wildly popular among Deep Blue supporters for his relentless televised exposes of alleged DPP corruption scandals involving those close to President Chen. The KMT has chosen to give Chiu a high position on its party list, since his imprisonment for leading a mob assault on the Kaohsiung district court after President Chen's reelection in 2004 precluded him from running in the primary for a district seat.

111. (C) Image legislators also include some political idealists who have tried to promote intra-party reform and progressive legislation on social, economic, and environmental issues, often in cooperation with counterparts from other parties. Such "positive image" legislators, especially urban intellectuals, fared poorly in the DPP's legislative primaries. A typical example is DPP legislator Bikhim Hsiao, a foreign policy specialist and proponent of women's and children's issues. Hsiao lost her primary to Wang Shih-chien, a DPP "tough" guy famous for strident attacks on the KMT in front of the TV cameras. Wang also benefited from stronger organization work with local party members. Wang, recently involved in an extramarital scandal, is now competing against another "positive image" candidate, the KMT's Justin Chou. Although Wang's Taipei District has a Green majority, his victory is not assured because of his scandal and this will be a closely watched race.

Comment

112. (C) Taiwan's new legislative election system is expected to increase the rate of incumbency and the power of

individual legislators, to marginalize small parties and accelerate the trend toward a two-party political system, and to force district legislators to be responsive to constituents' requests for services. Some fear the focus of legislators on their constituencies may cause them to neglect legislation and other important work of the LY itself. Unfortunately, the new system will not end and may even exacerbate the problem of vote buying in some districts. A significant number of the more strident legislators may also remain in the new LY, which means that partisan shouting matches and similar attention-grabbing antics are likely to continue. Nonetheless, some of these who lack a local support base may also find it difficult to retain their seats under this new system.

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